

Reflection Friday 7th Week Easter St Philip Neri 2023

Saint Philip Neri was born in Florence in 1515. At eighteen he went to Rome to earn his living as a tutor. He undertook charitable work among the young men of the city, and started a brotherhood to help the sick poor and pilgrims. Advised that he could do more good as a priest, he was ordained in 1551. He built an oratory over the church of San Girolamo, where he created services of spiritual readings and hymns, the origin of the oratorio. He continued to serve the young men of Rome, rich and poor alike, with religious discussions and organising charitable enterprises. He showed particular care for the young students at the English College in Rome, studying for a missionary life and probable martyrdom in England. He inspired other clergy to emulate him, and formed the Congregation of the Oratory. Oratorian foundations still flourish in many countries today. He died in Rome in 1595.

St Philip Neri was an enemy of solemnity and conventionality. Pompous penitents made their received salutary and deflating penances, such as walking through the streets of Rome carrying his cat (he was very fond of cats). When people looked up to him too much, he did something ridiculous so that they should not respect someone who was no wiser – and no less sinful – than they were. He wished to combat pride, or melancholy, or hero-worship.

Many saints, not just St Philip, have an abiding terror of being put on pedestals. They know their imperfections better than anyone, and being revered by other people is doubly bad.

Uprightness and virtue have their rewards, in self-respect and in respect from others, but beware of aiming for the result rather than the cause. Aim for joy, rather than respectability.